

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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ONE of the most significant dates in the history of the Church of Scotland in the course of the last two hundred and sixty years is May 13th, 1847. On that day one hundred years ago the union took place by which the United Presbyterian Church came into existence, the union in Tanfield Hall of the United Secession Church with the Relief Church. Four years before, in 1843, Tanfield Hall was the scene of an imposing ceremony when the great company of ministers and elders who took the momentous step of breaking away from the Established Church of Scotland met there and formed the Free Church of Scotland. That was a staggering blow to ecclesiastical unity in the Church of Scotland. It seemed to betoken a breach irreparable in the religious life of the land. For the moment it was paralysing. But when the shock was past and the dust of controversy had settled, in a short four years the tide had turned. A remarkable reaction set in. Tanfield Hall in 1847 saw another gathering, not so spectacular, not on so grand a scale. This time it was not to formulate disruption, but to initiate a new movement, the outcome of a new spirit, an aspiration towards unity within the Church of Christ in Scotland, the promise of what was at last achieved in 1929. It signalised the day when the dour determination of the Scot to have his own way gave way to the worthier spirit of mutual appreciation and combined effort. When the main branches of the Church in Scotland were happily united, when the Church of Scotland practically became one again in 1929, it was with the hope that sooner or later the small sections which remained outside will accept the hearty welcome which awaits them, should they respond and complete the union of Presbyterianism here.

The Union of 1929, and the terms on which it was effected, enable us to appreciate the significance of the Union of one hundred years ago, on May 13th, 1847, even better than did those who lived through those years. Why do I say so? It is because the terms of the Union of 1929 are substantially those on which the Churches forming the United Presbyterian Church united in 1847, and for which they then took their stand. What were these? The answer is not to be found so much in a minute study of documents as in a study of the life history of the uniting Churches

and of the united Church which they formed. For instance, both of those Churches owed their origin to abuses, upheld by the civil power under the operation of lay Patronage. It is well to remember that the re-introduction of the right of lay Patronage, abolished in 1690, but restored in 1712, was done in spite of the protest of the Established Church of the day as a flagrant breach of the Act of Security which had guaranteed all the Church's privileges as they existed at the time of the Union of the Kingdoms. It was against those foreseen abuses that Erskine and the Seceders took their stand, and seceded from the Church of Scotland, and Gillespie bowed to deposition from its ministry. These men had entered on their charges under the legitimate operation of Patronage. They were not opposed to an intimate connection between Church and State. They were alive to the necessity for the moral wellbeing of the community that it should be in vital touch with the Church of Christ. It was not the Church that required to be established by the State, but the State that required the strong foundation of the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ. What they took their stand against was the invasion, with the support of the State, of the inalienable rights of members of the Church of Christ to decide who should be their ministers. And they were the more emphatic in this as they found that under the exercise of Patronage men were being admitted to the ministry whose loyalty to the divine rights of Christ and to the saving merits of His cross was far from genuine.

These were matters on which Seceders and Relievers from the first were agreed. But another matter of permanent importance took its rise in the Relief Church, and that was the matter of open or free Communion. When Gillespie proceeded to dispense the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper for the first time after his deposition, he took as his motto the truly Christian sentiment, "I hold communion with all that visibly hold the Head, and with such only." Open Communion among the Protestant Churches was the old doctrine of the Reformation, and close Communion was one of the novelties which the disruptive spirit was beginning to introduce. Gillespie's attitude prevailed in the Relief Church. In due time that attitude was accepted by the Secession, and when they had adjusted their own divisions they found themselves so closely in agreement with the Relief Church that the way to union was plain sailing.

Here then we have in brief what the late Dr. Woodside elaborated in his volume on what he called "The Soul of a Scottish Church," the Church being the United Presbyterian Church. Its principles were the principles which it inherited from the two Churches from which it sprang. They were the inalienable rights of a Christian Church with which the civil power had no right to interfere and the spirit of brotherly fellowship

with all who love the Lord Jesus Christ. The united Church was also keenly evangelical both abroad and at home. Before either of the uniting Churches had initiated missions of their own they had lent steady support to the London Missionary Society and provided recruits for its work in Madagascar. James Chalmers, the martyr of New Guinea and the friend of Robert Louis Stevenson, came from the Secession church in Inverary. The Free Church Mission in Livingstonia found its pioneer in Dr. Laws, an Aberdonian U.P. The United Presbyterians inherited pioneer missions in Calabar, inspired by the young church in Jamaica, and, with Hope Waddell, Hugh Goldie and William Anderson at their head, took up the work there. In Kafraria they hailed their first convert, Tiyo Soga. They took the field, also, with John Ross and Dugald Christie at their head in Manchuria, and in India they broke new ground in Rajputana with Drs. Valentine, Shepherd and Somerville to lead them. Leading elders at home like Sir John Cowan and Duncan McLaren, with his like-minded wife, threw their strength into the Foreign Mission enterprise of their Church.

Maintaining the tradition of the Relief Church, who prepared the first Congregational Hymnbook, the United Presbyterian Church made much of congregational singing under the influence of outstanding precentors or choir masters, like Kennedy of Nicolson Street, Edinburgh (father of Mrs. Kennedy Fraser) and the brothers Moodie, William of Lansdowne, and John of Erskine Church, Glasgow.

The United Presbyterian Church held very enlightened views theologically. As at an early stage it entered a caveat against being committed to anything in the Confession of Faith that might seem to justify persecution, so later it took the lead, by the passing of a Declaratory Act, in distinguishing between things of primary importance and things secondary in its credal statements.

In the subsequent history of the United Presbyterian Church, it came to be identified very closely with the political agitation for the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Established Church. That is not to be wondered at. At the time it did not seem possible in any other way to secure for the Church as a whole that complete liberty from State interference in matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, which was essential to the rights of its members ; and to secure that its rights were not prejudiced in its control over its own property. There was many a lively battle on the matter with redoubtable leaders on both sides, Dr. Archibald Scott and Lord Balfour on the defensive and Dr. George Hutton in the attack. Who that ever heard Dr. Hutton on the

war-path can forget his magnificent sallies or caustic humour? For instance, he once described tentative approaches of politicians to the subject of Disestablishment, not quite sure how their party would like them—Gladstone as a little boy chalking up “Disestablishment” on a wall, running away, and then looking back to see if anybody had noticed it! Curiously enough, these encounters, in which the U.P.s were joined by leading Free Churchmen—among them Dr. Rainy—contributed to a better understanding between Frees and U.P.s and did something to pave the way for later union.

But there are two things that are to be remembered with regard to this whole Disestablishment movement. One is what has already been referred to, the attitude of the early Seceders and Relievers to the need for a proper relation between the Church and the State. Just as they did, so the United Presbyterians believed that this was essential to national well-being. The other is that the design of the movement was not to injure the Established Church, but to liberate it from bonds that made the possibility of unions with it impossible. Once the idea of union in the Church in Scotland had found lodgement, it soon found favour. There was early a movement, criticised and challenged indeed, but there all the same, in that direction in the United Presbyterian Church under the gracious leadership of Professor Calderwood. It was only strengthened by the ultimate union of the Free Church with the United Presbyterians. The United Presbyterians had given practical proof of their loyalty to this spirit by a real sacrifice. A considerable number of their congregations were in England. At the time of the Disruption, the Church of Scotland Churches in England that adhered to the Free Church position formed themselves into a separate Church there, the Presbyterian Church in England. In 1876, in the interests of union there, the United Presbyterian Churches in England were disjoined from the Scottish synod and joined the English Presbyterians. After a disappointing abortive effort, union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterians was effected in 1900. The Free Church had come to see that the essentials, for which the United Presbyterians had all along stood, were indispensable to the healthy life of the Church of Christ; but the union, when effected, owing to the preposterous judgment of Lord Halsbury, cost the Free Church a pretty penny. The U.P.s stood loyally by them through the anxious years, and the United Free Church was soon a well-welded community, all the more firmly one by reason of the trials.

Scarcely was this Union achieved when feelers began to be thrown out by men in the Church of Scotland as to the possibility of a wider union still. Suggestions were made as to lines of activity by way of co-operation

so as to avoid mere competition. May I speak of two in which I, an old U.P. with double Relief roots—both of my grandfathers were Relief ministers—had a considerable share? In both Churches there were committees dealing with social problems. With a view to avoiding needless competition and rivalry, a conference was arranged between the committees at which it became obvious that the committees were moving on distinct lines. The Church of Scotland, under the leadership of Professor Charteris, had developed schemes of practical utility in the provision of Homes for outcasts, for old folk, a hospital, and so on, since carried on in such a magnificent scale in the United Church. In the United Free Church the Committee had applied its endeavours to getting into touch with civic and industrial agencies and organisations such as Trade Unions, Chambers of Commerce and Employers' Associations, to study with them the situation, and if possible and if need be, to co-operate. It was decided at the conference that each committee should simply continue to pursue its separate course and support one another. As an example of what the United Free Committee achieved, it made a careful study of housing conditions along with the I.L.P., and brought to light in a report to the Assembly such an appalling account of slums in cities and farm buildings in the country that it led to the setting up of the first Government Commission on Housing, which in its turn substantiated every word of the Church Committee's report, and led one of the Commissioners on his way to sign the report, to say to me—on my challenging him as to the accuracy of our Church's report—"Yes," he said, "but if I had not seen it for myself, I would not have believed it."

Another case of co-operation contributed to far-reaching results. Plans were desired for more effective parochial work without overlapping within the bounds of the Presbyteries of Edinburgh. To secure this a conference was arranged by Dr. Butler, then of the Tron Church, and myself, which was held in the Church of Scotland Presbytery Hall. The proceedings were most harmonious and brotherly. As Dr. Butler told me afterwards in a friendly letter, Dr. Archibald Scott, who was present, expressed his delighted surprise and great gratification at the friendly spirit manifested by the United Free deputies. They were J. D. Robertson of Leith and myself. Indeed, on his way down the Mound with Butler, he said to him, "We must get alongside of these fellows"; and this was one of the factors that led him to table his motion in the General Assembly shortly after for unrestricted conference with the United Free Church on which in due course followed the Union.

There is a saying of the late Principal Denney in the year 1912 which is worth remembering in this connection. He said, "I want to see the

Churches united, but only on the two-fold condition ; that it does not interfere with Freedom, and that it does not impair our fraternal relations to our fellow Christians." But what is this but a repetition of the essentials for which Gillespie and the Relief Church stood and which were fundamental with the United Presbyterians, and are not these the terms on which the United Church stands to-day ?

Well, what has become of the once so heated contendings for Dis-establishment and Disendowment when at last terms of union had to be drawn up ? They are not even mentioned. But why ? Because a more excellent way had been revealed. There was Disestablishment. But it was not the Church that was disestablished by the State. It was the State which disestablished itself. It passed an Act in which it acknowledged the Articles of Union drawn up by the Churches to be legitimate, and they expressly declare that the Church receives from the Lord Jesus Christ and from Him alone the right and power subject to no civil authority to legislate and to adjudicate finally in all matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline. And so the Church was left, not like Mahomet's coffin, not like a statue suspended in mid air from which the pedestal had been removed, with no foundation, but established on the one sure foundation which is Christ the Lord. What more, what better, is needed ? It remains a National Church, representative of the Christian faith of the Scottish people, with a distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry.

Here is the outcome of the spirit of union that revealed itself on May 13th, 1847. Here can be seen and understood the significance of the testimony of the United Presbyterian Church, so far as it itself was concerned.

But there are two matters of wider concern, that reveal the significance of the United Presbyterian Church which ought not to be overlooked. For one thing the spirit which animated it and to which, indeed, it owed its existence, namely, the craving for unity within the ranks of the Christian Church, proved infectious and is growingly operative still. Unions took place among the smaller branches of those who had separated from the Established Church, and there are such movements among them still. There was a great movement in Canada, which resulted in the union of Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians. There was a similar movement among the same churches in Northern India, and in the framing of their constitution the moderator of the United Church of Canada (himself a Methodist) and myself—both, as it happened, to be in India

at the same time and attending their united Assembly—took part. Union between the Congregationalists and the English Presbyterians is under consideration by their Committees. A wonderful union has just been consummated in South India. And who shall say that the spirit that found expression in 1847 has had no part in the world-wide ecumenical movements of to-day?

This suggests a second feature of the 1847 union and its true spirit which well deserves consideration in ecumenical circles. The movement of 1847 was for unity, not uniformity. Where efforts for union have again and again been shipwrecked has been the insistence of some of the parties for uniformity, as if that were essential to unity, and frequently on matters of quite secondary importance. Such was never the spirit of the United Presbyterian Church. It endeavoured to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. There were varieties of ways of doing the work of the Church and of conducting the services of worship in the congregations of the uniting Churches with which there was no interference at the Union. The same was true when the Free Church united with the United Presbyterians, and is true within the now united Church of Scotland. And any attempt to impose a rigid uniformity in the conduct of public worship or the management of congregational affairs is keenly resented. Hearty co-operation within the easy bond of the unity of the spirit leads to mutual appreciation and to a consequent coveting of what are found by experience to be the best gifts.

With these two illustrations of the wider significance of the Union of 1847, the memory of the United Presbyterian Church may be left to the judgment of the years to come, as they afford a signal proof of how “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump until the whole is leavened.”

